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TITLE: Using Program Theory to guide the Development and Evaluation of an Intervention: The community Intervention Trial for Youth (CITY) project

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ISSUE: When designing an intervention, it is important to know not only what intervention activities will work, but also how they work. Researchers and program staff must determine the key components of the intervention, their interrelation, what outcomes to evaluate, and how the intervention might affect those outcomes. It can be useful to create a unique program theory for a project that provides a framework for describing the intervention and developing an evaluation plan (Bickman, 1987).

SETTING: The CITY Project is a national, 13-community study that will evaluate the effectiveness of a comprehensive community-level intervention in reducing HIV-related risk behaviors among young men aged 15-25 who have sex with men (YMSM).

PROJECT: Through formative research, discussions with local community partners, and meetings of the study investigators, a 5-component intervention was designed. Investigators also identified numerous possible outcomes of the intervention, including reductions in risk behaviors among YMSM, community-level changes in norms, and increased availability of services for YMSM. In order to narrow the list of outcomes and identify mediators through which the intervention may affect these outcomes, investigators participated in an exercise in which groups created various program theories to describe the causal mechanisms of the intervention. Following this exercise, investigators integrated these theories into a single program theory consisting of four parts: intervention activities, mediators, secondary outcomes, and primary outcomes. This program theory continues to be modified and clarified as the intervention components and evaluation plans are developed.

RESULTS: Program theory assisted the researchers in designing and implementing this complex study. The program theory was used as a guide in developing the study questionnaires. Key mediators (e. g. peer norms and social support), and outcomes (e.g. reduction in unprotected anal intercourse) that the intervention is expected to influence were identified and will be measured. By describing how the intervention is supposed to be work, the program theory also assisted researchers in identifying what resources are needed to implement the intervention and what process measures are needed to assess implementation. Finally, the program theory enabled researchers to determine the specific analyses of the study data will be necessary in order to assess if the intervention is effective.

LESSONS LEARNED: In order to fully comprehend the implementation of a multi-component intervention and evaluate its effectiveness, a program theory is necessary. Researchers and program planners should consider using program theory as a tool in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs.

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